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Lightkeepers' Memorial nears completion

By BRIAN BRENNAN
STAFF WRITER

Sometimes, dreams do come true. That much was in evidence Tuesday morning as 86 year-old Herb Jason, a lifelong Cohasset resident and lobsterman, watched at Government Island as workers from W.C. Canniff and Sons in Quincy lowered a 3300-pound engraved stone of polished black granite that will serve as the centerpiece of the memorial that has been a dream of Jason's since he was a boy.

The Antoine and Wilson Memorial ensures that the town will forever remember Joseph Antoine and Joseph Wilson, the two young lightkeepers who lost their lives when the original Minot's Ledge Light crashed into the sea, unable to withstand the vicious storm which struck the coast on the night of April 16, 1851.

"The lighthouse bell was ringing furiously around 11:00," Jason said in describing the scene of that night. "The lighthouse was swaying two feet from center on either side. Antoine and Wilson put a message in a bottle which said that the lighthouse would not last the night and put their initials, J.A. and J.W., on it."

A large engraving on the front of the memorial depicts the original Minot's Ledge Light as it looked before its untimely demise. Also engraved on the front is the story of Antoine and Wilson and of the furious storm that took their lives. A small engraving on the back of the memorial features an artist's rendering of the lighthouse crashing into the sea.

A smiling Jason, who just suffered a stroke three weeks ago, said that he felt a great deal of fulfillment as he watched his dream start to become reality.

"I'm so excited that this is really happening," he said. "I really started thinking seriously about this three years ago. I started with the idea of a bronze plaque, but that didn't seem sufficient to remember these two boys. I wanted something really special because these two boys were really special."

The polished black stone which serves as the focal point of the memorial was imported from India and cost roughly $20,000, according to Jason. It sits on a 2,000 pound circle of gray granite. Those stones sit in the middle of what will be a 12-foot diameter, circular compass rose.

The letters N, S, E, and W on the compass rose will be made of polished black granite, while the letters NE, SW, SE, and NW will be fashioned from Canadian granite, which Small described as "gray with a pink hue to it." Diamonds of polished gray will sit in between the directional symbols.

Jason said that the compass itself will be fashioned out of expensive, tapestry brick and that the masonry work will be done by Anthony "Scout" Barbuto of Hingham.

"He's working on the bricks right now," Jason said. "They're going to be individually cut and fitted. It's going to be beautiful."

Jason's attention to detail regarding the project has been nothing short of extraordinary. He said he has spent hundreds of hours visiting quarries and doing drawings along with his brother, Kenneth Jason. And his grandson, John Small.

"If you want something done well, you have to do it the right way," he said. "We want this memorial to last forever."

That passion for the project was demonstrated to W.C. Canniff and Sons sales representative Leo Cardarelli, whose company specializes in custom monuments.

"I always get people who come in and have tons of ideas for a project and then you never see them again," Cardarelli said. "I passed Herb off as one of those people when I met him for the first time. Even the second time he came in, I didn't really believe he was serious. The third time, he came in with all kinds of drawings and ideas and I thought I'd better start taking this guy seriously."

Jason said many have told him that he should include his own name on the memorial somewhere, as he was the driving force behind constructing it. He dismisses such talk, preferring to divert attention to Antoine and Wilson.

"I don't want my name anywhere on the memorial," he said. "Those two boys are the ones who gave their lives."

While he's not sure when the compass rose surrounding the engraved granite will be completed, Jason is already thinking about the dedication ceremony that will forever ensure the legacy of Antoine and Wilson.

"I can't wait for that day," he said. "The selectmen and [Town Manager] Mark Haddad have been supported this

project 100 percent and I hope they come when it's finished. It's really going to be something when it's done."